

Hillary Dobbs: Teamwork and Family Make the Best of Many Worlds

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Portraits by Melissa Fuller



Once, Hillary Dobbs envisioned a life as a professional show jumper. After an impressive Junior career under the tutelage of Missy Clark and John Brennan, her early professional career got off to a promising start—with dozens of Grand Prix wins, multiple Leading Rider awards from national shows and international Nations Cup success. Then, an unfortunate accident changed the course of her life—and though the injury still bothers her, Hillary is far from regretting the path her life has taken. “I couldn’t imagine being happier,” she summarized. “I’m enjoying my family life, and my professional life.”

With every twist of fate, horses have continued to play a role in Hillary's professional life—as have the lessons she learned growing up riding. Now, she gets to share both with a new kind of team: a family of her own. “When I came into the sport, it was a family affair, and it will always be a family affair in some capacity,” Hillary said. “I do a fair bit of reminiscing with my mom and dad, and with Missy and John, and still to this day we talk about the myriad life lessons you learn along the way with horses and in competition: true perseverance, patience, dedication—and teamwork. Missy emphasized it; my parents emphasized it; everything I've done has revolved around the team aspect.”

A Family Affair

Hillary and her twin sister, Heather, were on a horse at 2 weeks old, each in one of their father's arms. Hillary's father, Lou Dobbs, grew up riding Western, and her mother, Debi, rode English in her youth. When Hillary was born, the family was raising Quarter Horses and Appendix Quarter Horses at their home farm in Sussex, New Jersey. One lesson on a pony when she and Heather were little was all it took for them to fall in love with riding.

The barn taught English, of course, and it turned out that our poor Quarter Horses didn't want to jump quite as much as we did—but that doesn't mean I didn't try!” Hillary said. “So we took down the ‘Dobbs Quarter Horses’ sign and transitioned slowly into English. My mom would take us to all the local shows when we were young; we got bitten by the bug and before we knew it we were traveling all over New Jersey to compete in the leadline and crossrails.”

Looking back, Hillary says her favorite memories of showing as a child weren't her favorite memories as a child—they're moments like picking the ice out of the ponies' hooves at local shows during the winter and struggling with the figure-eight in the Mini Short Stirrup classes. “My mom would skid her feet in the sand and draw out a figure-eight for us, and I remember doing one perfect loop and then one tiny, pitiful loop and getting so frustrated,” Hillary laughed. “My other fond memories are like that—things that a little kid might get indignant over at the time, but they still make us laugh. My mom was the groom, the truck driver, the trainer sometimes, and it was a real family affair since I was young.”



Approaching their Junior years, Hillary and Heather had both dreamed of riding with Missy Clark and John Brennan since they were young, plastering their bedroom wall with pictures and articles of the acclaimed trainers. Armed with posters and a pre-written speech, Hillary and Heather gave their parents a presentation on why they should be allowed to train with Missy and John. It worked, and the twins began training at North Run when they were 15. Hillary had dreams of being an “equitation queen,” but Missy and John insisted she try the jumpers for the first time—and Hillary loved it.

“It was a wonderful journey with them,” Hillary said. “I was a little late to the party with the jumper division, but through a lot of blood, sweat and tears, they brought me along and it culminated with my favorite memories as a Junior being the team competitions—Young Riders and Prix des States. That’s when I really fell in love with the concept of a team, and it’s really carried through as a theme for the rest of my life and professional career.”

From College to Coaching

Late start or not, Hillary’s success in the jumper ring as a Junior, including winning both team and individual gold at the 2006 Adequan/USEF National Junior Jumper Championship, carried her straight into the professional Grand Prix ranks. In 2007, she got her first taste of another team competition—and another gold—riding for the U.S. at the Nations Cup in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The next year, Hillary’s name was added to those show jumping greats to receive the USET Foundation’s Maxine Beard Show Jumping Developing Rider Award—all while balancing riding with her studies at Harvard University.

“In the winter, I would go to class Monday through Wednesday, fly down to WEF, show Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Sunday night, and fly back. I would do that the entire circuit,” Hillary shared. “I was very fortunate to have a lot of support: of course my family, emotional and as well as financial support; Missy and John, I had 100% faith in them and their program, and the work that we put in together; my friends and my roommates, who said I majored in show jumping and minored in government. I was lucky that I had supportive friends, who helped me with notes when missing class was unavoidable. I had the best of both worlds.”



Her degree in government allowed Hillary to take a broad range of classes, including finance and economics, which she thought would help her further her professional riding career. Then in 2012, a horse she was riding slipped, and when she tried to jump off, her foot got stuck in the stirrup: The resulting knee injury put an end to Hillary’s top-level competition.

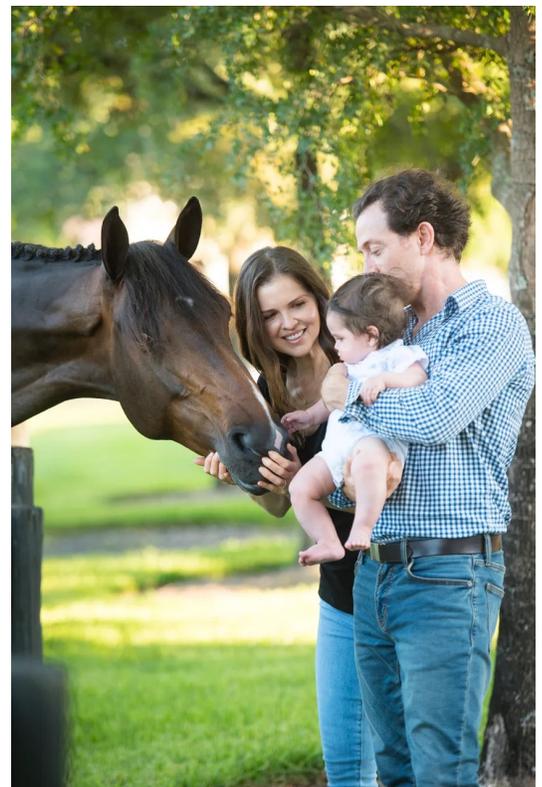
After training at a private barn for a couple of years following the accident, word came through a family friend that the position of assistant coach at the University of South Carolina had opened up. “Honestly, I said verbatim, ‘Forty girls? No way. It’s not gonna happen,’” Hillary admitted. “But really, the team component spoke to me and I chewed on it for a while. I said, ‘Sure, let’s give this a try,’ and I fell in love with it.”

Just as she’d loved riding on teams as a Junior and professional, and relied on the love and support of her “team” through college, Hillary was once again able to help create a team. For Hillary, whose nickname in the barn, coined by John Brennan, had been “Mother Hen” since she was 15 years old, coaching was a perfect fit. “That’s one of the reasons why I truly love my role as coach,” she said. “You’re never just someone’s trainer, or you’re never just someone’s coach. You’re a mentor and a confidant. The bond is special—I had a bond with the girls that changed my life. They became family, and the parents. We won a national championship, and it was wonderful—a special time.”

New Teams

In 2017, [Malvern Bank](#) President and CEO Tony Weagley decided to start an equestrian division there. He approached Hillary, with her history in the industry and relevant education, to help develop the fledgling program. “Tony and I met in Aiken and I shared his vision—it wasn’t just logical, it was something I knew I could get behind, and I thought I could bring something unique to the equestrian community,” Hillary said. “We’re both equestrians, and we saw a need for our services. It’s a unique community, and we understand the business and cater to our fellow equestrians.”

Working for Malvern Bank in Wellington, Hillary enjoys being able to accommodate the equestrian lifestyle with specialized banking products and an extra level of service—even getting loan documents signed in the tents at WEF. The job has also accommodated her pursuing the best of two more worlds: career and family. Just as she wanted and worked for both riding and in



college, Hillary has always wanted both a thriving career and a family of her own—and it worked out at just the right time.

“Starting a family has honestly been a dream come true—a fairytale,” Hillary said. “I met the man of my dreams at the end of January 2020, and it was love at first sight. He moved to Florida a few weeks later, and we have been side by side ever since.” Not only does Hillary now get to share the equestrian world with her husband, Christian D’Andrea, but with their son, Kingston, who will be a year old in October. “I wake up every morning excited for the day—I spend as much quality time as possible with King in the morning before work. We cherish every minute of family time, and after work, it’s a glorious reunion!”

Though she hasn’t ridden since she found out she was “in foal,” Hillary is looking forward to getting back in the saddle—including on horses bred by her parents and a few offspring of Hillary’s beloved Grand Prix horse Corlett. The young horses are in training with Missy and John, and if that wasn’t “coming full circle” enough, it was Missy that introduced Kingston to his first horse. “I can’t even describe it—I was laughing and emotional at the same time, because of course it was at Missy and John’s, and that means so much,” Hillary said. “Kingston is fearless; he loved it. I think I have a million pictures of him just reaching for the horse.”

Though her equestrian career hasn’t turned out to be what she once thought it would, Hillary wouldn’t change a thing. “Looking back, it’s been a series of incredible twists of fate that have kept me intertwined in the horse community—and that’s important to me,” Hillary said. “It’s in my blood, and it will always be a passion of mine. I truly believe I will always be connected to the horse world in some capacity, and only time will tell what that is.”

Photos by Melissa Fuller, msfullerphotography.com